May 1963: Gameland was lush with the bloom of spring on a bright afternoon, its stillness interrupted by a sputtering Volkswagen bus trailing along an asphalt road carved through the dense mountain forest. The bus was painted black with a blue top, and the windows were tinted.

The vehicle pulled to the side of the road, parking in a narrow dirt lot. It sat briefly motionless, then shook gently, shadows moving behind its glinting windows before the engine was killed and the driver's door unlocked with a pop. Out stepped a young man with short brown hair and beard, grabbing a canvas satchel which he slung over his red-plaid wool coat. He walked around to the side cabin door and cranked its handle, sliding it open. A layer of smoke seeped out and up, it stunk of cannabis, but the two men who emerged were puffing cigarettes.

The first was square-jawed with a modest blonde pompadour; he wore a brown leather suede jacket and a brass belt buckle emblazoned with a running horse. Attached to his belt was a long leather sheath holding a machete. The second wore a green plaid button-up shirt with a large canteen and bedroll slung over his back; he had slicked black hair and a gaunt face. The trio were stripling Caucasians.

“Uh-huh, this is the place, a lot more overgrown since Boy Scouts, though,” the one in

the green shirt commented, flicking his cigarette to the ground and rubbing it with his sneaker.

“You think there'll be any bears out here, Hammond?” The red coat queried with a hint of nervousness.

“Yeah? But they should be out of hibernation for a couple of months now, shouldn't bother us any,” Hammond assured.

The blonde had just finished a long drag, exhaling while speaking.

“You should've taken your daddy's revolver with us, and then we'd have no worries, I'd pop one right between the eyes like Eastwood.”

“What do you mean? I'm sure you could take on a mama bear with that blade you got,” Hammond jested.

“You say that, but faced with death, I got a lot of fight in me. I've always wanted to try bear steak.”

“Oh sure, and maybe after that, you can fight for Kennedy and find some tiger,” Hammond chuckled.

“And maybe I will! Whatever, just grab the trash before we leave.”

“Don't let him get you down, Norman. Now, let's have a drink before we set off,” the red shirt said, taking a bottle of brown rum from his sack.

Norman nodded, dropping his cigarette butt into the dirt. He took three swigs and then readied

himself. The path they traveled down was not much wider than a deer trail, sparsely beaten by men. Hammond haphazardly threw the trash bag he had taken with them into the brush; when it landed, it burst open, revealing beer cans, wrappers, and smoked ends of rolled herbs.

While walking, they laughed and made pulpy conversation: “-I thought it was real good,” Hammond said defensively, arm propped around his bedroll, which now drooped under his shoulder.

“I'll never understand how you like that shit. James Dean's alright, but his movies are always boring, and he acts like a retard. The action was decent, but didn't go far enough. I liked the idea of that chicken game, though,” Norman said, smirking.

“You'd be numb in the head to play chicken with cars and a cliff,” Hammond replied.

“Of course it would, it's just a funny idea, is all… *Rebel Without A Cause*, a man living without a cause ain't living at all, when I die I'mma' die for something great, not cause I got nothing better to do.”

“What do you think about this, Raymond?” Hammond asked, pulling the red shirt into the discussion, who responded, saying:

“Well then, what's your cause, Norman?”

The blonde paused momentarily, contemplating, a faint perturbation in his expression: “All I know is, I'm not gonna go out

like a punk. Nobody's gonna' make me kneel, I'll either be standing tall or six feet under, and everyone will remember my name. If that's not something to live by, I don't know what is."

Hammond nodded a few times as Raymond digested what he had just heard, saying: "Can't argue with that. Anyway, how far away are we from the waterfall?"

"Should only be a couple hours or so, once we find the creek, it'll be a straight shot there," Hammond assured.

The gang trekked through the temperate jungle, Norman opening the path with his machete. Sunlight beamed through the treetops, shadows slow-dancing underneath the gently swaying leaves. As the trio arrived at a small clearing, Raymond suggested they rest there after the considerable time they had been walking. The other two obliged, Hammond smoking a cigarette from a pack he had borrowed.

"Let me see my Camels," Norman called.

Hammond reached into his pocket and searched around, becoming distressed as he produced nothing: "I-I can't find them," he said nervously.

"I gave them to you not even five minutes ago. How can you not find them?" Norman reprimanded.

"I just can't, man!"

“Bullshit! Probably hiding them for yourself, you fiend, listening to so much of that nigger music, you're practically turning into one.”

Hammond's face turned ugly, but before he could spit a rebuttal, Raymond cut between them: “Whoa', whoa', he wouldn't do something like that, you know. He must've dropped them not too far back, right?”

Hammond was hot and bewildered, then simmered down, jerkily shrugging his arms: “Must've, I guess, I swear to god I put them in my pocket.”

Norman shook his head, placing his thumbs over his belt buckle: “Well, then *I guess* we're going back to find them.” He concluded, turning backward and sauntering off.

Raymond patted Hammond on the shoulder consolingly, and then they both left with Norman.

Raymond couldn't be bothered to scan for the pack of Camels like the others. As the friends marched, he thought about their impending graduation from high school, amazed that it was only a little less than a month away. The beauty of the wildwood began to take hold of him; the flora seemed to wrap itself up around the golden sunshine, and for a moment, God crept into mind.

“We've been walking for a good bit now; if I dropped it, we would've passed it,” Hammond said reluctantly, slowing his pace.

Norman stopped, frustrated: “Well, they're out here somewhere, aren't they?” He nipped.

A prodding, silent pause ensued, which was quickly broken by a sighing relief of tension: “I guess there's no use bugging about it now, let's just make it to the falls.” He conceded.

Now that they were still, a suspicion snuck upon Raymond: he felt that they had not been on this part of the track before.

“Are you sure we went back the right way?” He said.

“How do you mean? The trail never split, and how could you tell anyway? We've seen nothing much but trees this whole time,” Norman reasoned.

Raymond absently examined his surroundings, unable to shake the feeling; Norman made sense, though, and so he was forced to agree.

They all continued their journey forward through the forest, Raymond once again briefly producing his bottle of rum, which everyone nursed to lift spirits during the trip.

“-A-humina-humina-humina, a-thank you very much,” Hammond joked, which caused Norman to chuckle from his stomach.

“Man, you ain't nothing but a hound dog,” he replied.

“Damn right I'm a dog, we're all just a bunch of dogs.”

“You might be right, but I'm more like a wolf, which means I'm the leader of the pack.”

“You wish, bitch,” Hammond snickered, causing Norman to become defensive. He began to speak but choked, too irritated to promptly wit a response: “I think we're more like the Rat Pack,” Raymond interjected.

“Yeah, I'm Frank Sinatra, and Hammond is Sammy Davis,” Norman said, grinning.

The posse came to a grove enclosed by trees with broad leaves, which brimmed a large opening for the sky. The ground was clear with low grass, and in the middle was an impressive circle of small stones placed neatly against each other, as if it were a wall erected for protection. Confusion and intrigue swept the group: “What is this shit?” Norman exclaimed as the three meandered towards the stones.

“I've never seen this spot before, and these rocks must've been scouts or some kids or somebody, making the perimeter for a camp,” Hammond theorized, stepping over the wall to look at it from a different angle.

Raymond gazed around. The whole area seemed surreal, like something had bent the trees to shroud this space and ordered the grass to grow only so short. He didn't want to be here for long; he went to voice his concern, but found another geist had already been brewing between the other two.

Norman punted a stone with his boot, sending it away from the circle. Hammond picked up another and lobbed it into the tree line.

“Hey, you guys, I don't think we should be doing this,” Raymond said, but they heeded none, continuing to tear the formation apart.

“Man, fuck this, we're practically lost out here. We should've hit the creek by now, park rangers changed the trail and messed our shit up,” Hammond vented, soothing his agitation by throwing another rock, cracking the bark of a tree trunk.

“What if the people who made this are still out here?”

“Stop being a pussy, we ain't breaking any law,” Norman remarked, continuing as he was.

Raymond heard rustling in the woods around them. He turned and peered about, attempting to deafen the boisterousness of the destruction to identify what it was. It came from multiple angles, like a dispersed pack of animals moving through the underbrush. He swore he saw shadows darting below the trees and bushes, but could not make out any shape. Creeping closer to the edge, he concentrated to try and catch a glimpse of one of them, an instinct of being watched pulling his attention towards a small, shadowy face tucked within a thicket of brambles. Its yellow eyes glinted sharply before Norman called out: “Yo, Raymond!”

Startled, Raymond turned. He quickly glanced back to find the creature again, but could not, and the commotion had vanished. “What?” He answered.

“It's about time we kept moving, and don't worry, there'll be more bushes to look at on the way,” Norman teased.

Raymond sighed, deciding to keep what he had just experienced to himself, believing his friends would pay no mind anyway. They left the circle scattered in bits; a sorry sight compared to the perfect structure it had been before.

The trail ahead was uncomfortably thin and veiled in laurels. Norman sweated profusely from swinging his machete as he cut through the foliage. The tightness was intimidating; the sensation of being lost rearing its head.

Hammond made a curt, half-hearted assurance that they were going in the right direction.

The gang barely spoke, daring not to raise the obvious concern further. This thought roiled within, becoming increasingly more abrasive the longer they were forced to traverse between the dense hedges, until a soft sound of running water was heard. Then, relief washed over them as they emerged into a creekside.

“Here it is! Here's the creek! Now it's only a matter of following it upstream until we reach the falls, I bet y'all thought we were boutta' get

stranded, didn't ya'?" Hammond declared, gleamingly.

"I'm just glad we're with a scout who can get us back on track. I'll make sure you get a new patch for this when we get back," Raymond joked.

"As if you had the authority to give me a merit, but don't worry, you can pay me back some other way. For now, I'd appreciate some of that rum." Hammond received and sipped from the bottle. Afterward, the others followed suit. It was at this point that the group had become properly swilled, edging about the line between functional and reckless intoxication.

Although the trail had dissipated, they persevered lightheartedly, unchallenged by the forest floor's open space.

"We oughta' roll up soon, I'm fixing to smoke something," Norman said.

"We should wait, or else we might get too crossed to make it there," Hammond responded, taking a drink from his canteen.

"Man, I'm not worried about that, but it's already starting to get late in the day. Do you think we'll be able to get there before sundown?"

"Shit, I don't know…"

The trek and its strangeness was catching up with the band, offering a compromise. Their plans had been swirling around and began to capsize; imminent respite became the priority.

“I reckon it'd be best if we settled down somewhere for the night,” Raymond weighed in.

The rest agreed and slowed pace into a stroll, looking about for a sweet spot while walking and talking. That golden sunlight, which enchanted the start of their journey, had now long since passed, replaced with a cool, blueish-grey sky that signaled the packing away of the day.

“-That thing's gonna be boss, man, how much longer you think it'll be till' it's done?” Hammond asked.

“My buddy at the shop's helping me finish up the wiring, and after that, it should be running just in time for graduation,” Norman announced, beamingly.

“Okay, dude, imagine this: everybody just threw their hats in the air, now they're talking to their friends and family and saying “Oh my god, I can't believe it!” or whatever crap. Then, you come in barreling down the football field in that hot-rod, tearing up the turf and spitting dirt all over the teachers and everyone else!”

“Now that's that retarded James Dean shit I was talking about before; if I really did that, they'd send my ass straight to the nut-house, and it'd be good riddance.”

“I'm sure no one there would forget it, though,” Raymond commented.

Norman smirked, but quickly, his demeanor turned confused.

“Hold up for a second,” he said, briefly gesturing his arm out to the side, and the others held their footing.

Past the ambiance of the wood and water, a faint, echoing chant was heard from down the creek. It was melodic and sounded of a man.

“What in the hell?” Hammond exclaimed, expressing the group's sentiment. A shot of nervousness struck through Raymond and Hammond; Norman also felt a stroke of uneasiness, but responded more confidently, with a matter-of-fact: “I guess somebody else is out here.”

“Yeah, shit, and a loon by the sound of it, we best find some other way around,” Hammond insisted.

“Nah, we might as well check it out, and maybe he can help us set up camp. Besides, it wouldn't be neighborly not to say hello.” Norman gave out a weak airy laugh, but the others weren't convinced; he loosely placed his palm upon the hilt of his machete and made an assurance: “It'll be fine.”

“Well, fine then, but let's just be careful, I don't want my skin to end up a new coat by next morning,” Raymond settled.

“Oh, don't flatter yourself, you'd make one butt ugly coat,” Raymond jeeringly knocked

Norman's shoulder, and they stepped onward with lighter spirits, Hammond falling in suit, begrudgingly.

Heading courageously towards the source, they were now close enough to discern the lyrics of a song which were sung in a low, guttural voice: “fishies, fishies, fishies for me, fishies fill my belly with glee, fishies, fishies, catch 'em quick, catch 'em with my fishy stick.” This chorus was repeatedly mulled out by its singer, with intermediate pauses, its tone disturbing yet childish.

The gang soon made contact with a royally unkempt man with pasty skin, who seemed the same age as them, apparelled in a torn and ill-fitting camouflage hunter's jacket and pants. His feet were wrapped in dirty cloth, and he wore a scraggly beard, with a mane of hair that was long and wild.

Knelt with a wooden spear at the edge of the creek bank, he paid the men no mind, continuing to aim his weapon towards the water: “fishies, fishies, fishies for me, fishies fill my belly with glee, fishies, fishies, catch 'em quick, catch 'em with my fishy stick.”

“Uh, are you alright, sir?” Raymond asked,

“Shhh! Can't you see? You'll scare 'em away,” the man responded, not even bothering to take a glance at the arriving crew.

“Listen, do you-” Norman began, but he was interrupted by an eruption from the fisherman:

“Aaagh! Have y'all no manners?! I oughta stick one of you for dinner, huh?” He said, swiveling around, flipping the spear above his shoulder with one hand, and making jab motions towards them.

“Sorry, eugh- We were just wondering if you knew a good spot where we could stay for the night,” Raymond negotiated.

The man calmed down, his mouth stretching into a wide grin, exposing a set of jagged teeth. He relaxed the spear and stood up, softly shaking his head: “That's better, but not by much. Now, for the sake of shedding ubiquity, what are the names of you?”

“I'm Raymond, and he's Norman, and that's Hammond.”

“Excellent, you can't expect to wring much respect amongst strangers. You may call me, uh, Phineas.”

The silence that proceeded spoke more than what anyone could have; the smile on Phineas implied a restrained revelry, faced with three wandering babes who fought the nagging reality that they were all out of their depth.

“Are you lost, man?” Hammond asked.

“Far from it, friend, I live just over the bend, y'all can stay there until morning. I haven't spoken to a man in some seasons, so it'd be my pleasure.”

The trio looked to each other for suggestion, but a consensus had already been apathetically made. They decided to go with Phineas, who insisted on denying conversation until arriving at his home, which they did after a short time.

The four found a decrepit wooden shanty, behind which was a wall of bushes and vines that swallowed its rear. A collection of salvage was littered around, mostly rusted metal parts, a mass of which leaned against the house. Spaced out in front of the door was a fire pit contained by loose stone with a laid log and stump surrounding it, filled with coals eager to spark. Although it was now dry, the site was badly water-worn, and the rolling creek could be faintly heard in the near distance. By this time, the sun had been well snuffed, and it would be dark within the hour.

The three friends set what they carried down together in a pile as everyone gathered round, Phineas chucking his spear away carelessly.

“I must assume there is a tribute for me, considering my generous hospitality and the interruption of my nightly fish,” Phineas bartered, throwing fuel into the pit from a stack of twigs and limbs.

“I brought some rum with us, if you'd like,” Raymond offered, showing the bottle inside his satchel.

“I have drink stronger than that swill,” Phineas sneered.

“Do you smoke?” Hammond questioned.

“Indeed, I do, there are fine weeds of wild tobacco that I pick and dry, not like this filth I found today, smells like shit shavings,” he responded, revealing a familiar pack of Camel cigarettes from his jacket pocket.

“Hey- how in the hell, those are mine!” Norman called, surprised.

“Oh, of course they are. Here, take them if you'd like; I was going to throw them in with the fire.” Phineas tossed the pack onto the ground below Norman, who scrambled it into his hands, relieved yet bewildered.

“I was going to roll some pot,” Hammond declared.

Phineas seemed disinterested but not revolted by the idea, busy stuffing a ball of kindling into his loose wooden construction. “Gimme' a lighter,” he said, and Hammond produced a Zippo, passing it over and granting the fire to be set. The flame plumed, burning time away into the black.

Phineas was sitting on his stump, dangerously close to the fire, warming his blood like a serpent.

“So, how long have you been out here?” Raymond questioned while smoking a cigarette, along with Norman.

“Mh- I'd like to think I was born here, that's certainly what it feels like,” Phineas answered, staring with shuttered eyes into the blaze.

“Right, right, for sure,” Hammond affirmed, giving a nodding gesture as he sprinkled cannabis grinds into a rolling paper.

“I'm still baffled, I mean, what are the chances of you finding my Camels? You must cover a lot of ground in a day,” Norman said.

“I usually don't stray too far away from home,” Phineas said, “but my discovery of those was no coincidence; many things are placed in path for me. The forest is kind enough to gift what has been lost by ramblers such as yourself.”

“Just sounds like luck to me, man, I found a five-dollar bill on the ground a few weeks ago; doesn't make me too special.”

Phineas glared at Norman, stabbing him with his eyes: “You'll see,” he said, abruptly standing up and walking into his shack.

“Hey, don't piss him off,” Raymond reminded Norman.

“He pissed himself off, the fucking nut, living out here so long he doesn't know how to have a conversation like a normal person,” he argued back in a lowered voice.

Hammond wasn't perturbed much, he had just finished crafting a joint the size of his middle finger. When it was lit, Phineas reappeared, holding

a sack and returning to his seat. He opened the bag, withdrawing a metal flashlight and gesturing to Hammond: “I found this lying in a pile of rocks,” Phineas said, offering it over with the handle extended.

Hammond grasped the joint with his lips and accepted the item, fiddling with it. He pressed a rubber button, switched the bulb on, and let it shine, then waved the tool around comically.

“Turn that off! There's only the one battery,” Phineas ordered aggressively.

Hammond made a snide, irritated expression and did as instructed.

“Okay, just chill, man,” he responded.

“Give me that back, and let me see that smoke, too.” Hammond took one more drag, handing the flashlight over, then exhaled, passing the cannabis.

Phineas grabbed both, propping the joint onto his mouth and dropping the flashlight onto the ground, afterward reaching into his bag to uncover another item. He pulled out a beat pack of playing cards tied together with a string of twine. He stood up again, shuffling the deck and sauntering to Raymond, fanning and showing it face down towards him: “Select three cards, then return them to me,” Phineas said, and with a degree of suspicion, Raymond complied and did so.

Phineas inspected the cards for a moment and smirked. He presented, from left to right, a six of hearts, a four of clubs, and an eight of spades. He repooled them with the rest of the deck and handed it back to Raymond. “Now, try to find them,” Phineas dared.

Raymond searched, but curiously, he could not recover a single card of his. As this occurred, Phineas unveiled a final item: a corked glass bottle filled with a murky, vibrantly yellow liquid.

“Is that piss?” Norman inquired, seriously.

“You must take me for being something lower than an animal. You wish it was piss! Cretin!” Phineas reprimanded. Opening the container, he sank a sizable slug of the potion before giving it to Norman, who sniffed the brim and was startled by its odor. He was initially repulsed, but after brief contemplation, he took a swig. His eyelids contracted, and his skin winced as his body recoiled and then recovered from the hit.

“Holy fuck, that's some tough shit!” He cried, slowly turning his head to Raymond. “You gotta try this,” he continued, a mischievous smile mooning as he swayed the bottle.

Raymond grabbed it, smelling its contents; it reeked of alcohol, lemon, and stale mushroom. He clenched his nostrils and swung back a dose, his nervous system squeezed, the sensation like a fuel line pumping kerosene through his spine, then

ripping an explosion in his skull: “Oah-, woa-,” he groveled out. He looked up at Phineas, who was soaking in glory, eyes sparkling.

“Stop holding, you hog, keep it moving,” Phineas commanded. Raymond relayed the liquor to Hammond, who also consumed it and had a response similar to the others.

The night went on, the bottle draining, and it arrived at Raymond again. After drinking, he noticed objects floating in the shallow volume of liquid. It was the cards he had pulled earlier; confoundingly, they were not bent or creased from entry into the chamber. He became visibly distraught, and Phineas saw this, releasing an unyielding laugh that expelled the joints end from his maw and heaved his stomach. Nausea gripped Raymond; his vision started to pulsate and warp, a tunneling movement like the body of an accordion or caterpillar. An invisible current flowed through him, as if his blood had caught in a slipstream, yanking at his flesh and skin, panic alarmed at a sharp frequency.

Normand couldn't help but uproar hysterically with Phineas while Hammond seemed paralyzed, eyes glazed and gazing into the fire. Although the prospect of escaping to a setting more advantageous than the fire pit was irrational, the urge was too powerful. Everyone had appeared to have lost their minds, and Raymond would too if he

didn't leave, he thought. So he rattled up, lunged to steal the flashlight off the dirt, and darted away into the brush. He clacked it on to illuminate his path over root and under branch, jogging like a deer on hot heels. Running until the glow of the fire had disappeared, he looked back and saw that no one had given chase. Raymond stood idly, sensing as if he were being spied upon. The darkness grappled against his light beam, trying to coax it into submission. Several pairs of familiar shining yellow eyes blinked and shifted across the forest floor around him. “Kill the light. Kill the light,” he begged himself, and was too compelled to disobey. The dim moon cast an abysmal shadow, giving vague shape and texture to the woods; he was completely enveloped by the dark. The eyes scattered away, leaving Raymond face-to-face with the presence of a strange entity, an ethereal cloud of void manifesting itself from the absence of light, blacker than tar. “Where am I running to?” He asked himself with surprising hostility. He was tripping up. It felt as though his mind had opened, exposing fertile soil, subject to sowing. In a vie for control, he impotently yelped: “What are you?” He was speaking to the wood, the foundation of a game he didn't know he was playing. Raymond was turning inside out and against himself, warping to a foreign will. He meant to ask: 'What do you want?' Then the thought of a hot bath swelled with

magnificence, the liquids, jellies, and gelatins within him simmering. He felt as if his suit was a pouch, his vessel a simple waterskin. Almost lost, something far away called to reason, a slight but impossible to ignore panging at his awareness. The answer was simple, and if he were to wait a second longer, it would be forgotten.

Raymond pressed his thumb upon a button, and the light flashed back on; bones locked in place, and screeching echoed throughout his mind. With a sizzle and pop, a path burned outside himself. Without hesitation, he sprinted away in the direction he came from, pointing the light in front of his feet. He saw those shining eyes again, swarming erratically, snickering softly, and circling closer. Finding and following the firelight, he arrived and burst through the treeline to the group. The creatures were gone, and all was unsettlingly calm. Norman laid unconscious next to the fire, wrapped in his jacket, while Phineas and Hammond sat together on the log. Phineas was whispering to Hammond, who was still paralysed by the flame.

Phineas fixed his attention on Raymond, giving him a stern, knowing look that was both threatened and threatening. Despite all that was unresolved, the use of remaining awake had been exhausted, so they all slept soon after. Raymond awoke with the most jarring hangover; he swore he could feel his brain sloshing around its cranium

with every head movement, but considering the night prior, he was in a substantially more well-adjusted condition. He rolled over, noticing how the sunlight was blotted behind thick layers of clouds in the sky. The first thing Raymond saw after rising from the ground was Phineas, who was squatting upon his stump and smoking a pipe: “Good afternoon, sleeping beauty,” he said.

“Afternoon?” Raymond remarked, still in a daze.

“We stayed up real late, and y'all slept in real late. Here, take this, it'll straighten your head,” Phineas said, standing and offering the pipe.

“I'm not smoking or drinking anything you give me again.”

“It's just tobacco.”

Raymond lurched up, snagging the pipe and drawing smoke from it. “Where's my friends?” He asked.

“Hm, must've run off. Why? Am I not your friend?”

Raymond didn't respond, choosing to rest in silence. It wasn't long until Hammond and Norman returned, reeking of cannabis.

“Look who's finally awake!” Norman announced.

“Where were you all last night?” Hammond asked.

“What do you mean?” Raymond said.

“You were gone for hours, man, we thought you got lost.”

Raymond swore he wasn't away for nearly that long. He placed a hand on his forehead and rubbed it. Weary and fed up, he decided that whether or not Hammond was accurate is irrelevant.

“Must have been lost, then.”

“Uh-huh. Anyway, we talked with Phineas, and he said he knows the way back to the road. If we leave now, we could probably make it to the van by dark,” Norman explained.

“Guess that means we're not seeing the falls?” “Heh- If you wanna keep swimming up shit's creek, good luck.” Raymond smiled, giving a sly signal of awareness towards Phineas and, taking one last puff, handed the pipe back. He agreed to the plan, drank some water, and then the four of them departed with their belongings, including Phineas’s sack.

The path traveled made no need for Norman's machete, and they moved along with relative ease.

“I'm thinking about what you were saying last night, Phineas, about the forest and how it does things for you? What exactly did you mean by that?” Raymond said as the group trekked.

“I have no control over what does and does not happen; I just live with it the best I can. Being

alone out here, you need all the friends you can get.” Phineas elaborated.

“Friends?”

“The spirits of this wood demand respect and obedience. They decide what's where and where what happens, there's no fighting something like that, no sir. If you want to live out here, you must follow their rules.”

“What rules?”

“Well, they hate the pollution and littering, so don't be leaving your crap everywhere. Most importantly, they don't like to be disturbed, especially the sanctuaries and secret places; you can feel it when you find one, like there's a mist in the air.”

Raymond didn't expect such direct answers. His mind flipped back to the stone circle from yesterday, could that have been one of those places?

“How did you really end up out in these woods, man? And don't tell us cougars raised you,” Norman pressed.

“Hmph- I lived in a tiny town, didn't have any friends, only had my daddy. Played by the creek most of the time, moving pebbles and rocks. I liked freeing up the water and helping it flow. The creek was my closest companion until one day, it swept me up and spit me out, and that's when I found that old shack. So, I've been living there ever since.”

Norman was forced to be satisfied with the answer, but something still frustrated him.

“I'm sorry that happened to you,” Hammond consoled.

“No need to be a smidge sorry, Hammond, coming here was the best thing to ever happen to me. I've been taken well care of, and now I don't have to worry about anyone else but me and the trees.”

Hammond seemed delighted to hear that, while Phineas lightheartedly chuckled. Phineas glanced towards Raymond, quickly grinning with wide and wild eyes, then returning and flattening his expression again; no one else noticed. Raymond's confidence was ripped from him. This was a dangerous game, and he wished he didn't have to play it, but he was constrained from all sides, forced to follow a manipulator's lead. The gang walked for hours until they came to cross a railroad. Hammond made a passing comment about it, something about bums and boxcars. However, Norman halted between the track beams, firmly staking his position and demanding the others' attention.

“Why don't we just walk the tracks out of here?” He said, stalling everyone's journey.

“Uh, because Phineas is showing us the way?” Hammond reminded.

“Fuck him! Why are we trusting some bushwhacker to tell us what's up or down? He's clearly out of his mind!”

“It would be days and nights before you pass any semblance of civilization, and even then, the woods won't let you go more than a few miles. You'll be flipped around and walking back and forth till you waste away. Only I know the path out,” Phineas said plainly.

“Is someone gonna let me in on what the fuck is going on here?! Am I on the god damn *Twilight Zone*, or what?”

“It's the truth, Norman, there's something bad lurking around. How do you think we got lost in the first place? I don't like this either, but we've gone too deep to turn back now,” Raymond appealed.

Norman was boiling, thinking as he tapped his boot on a wooden board.

“Fine, but if he tries anything slick, I'll cut his damned head off!”

Phineas cackled, his lack of concern for Norman’s warning appearing somehow intimidating to the one issuing it. “Alright, ahem- let's keep moving,” he said, rubbing an eye and leveling himself.

The posse continued hiking, and the conversations along the way were sparse. One of the few notable events was when it was well into

the evening, and what sounded like a kitten cried out rhythmically among the trees.

“Hear that?” Phineas said to Raymond, “That's a catbird. I wonder who it calls for.”

Raymond didn't know how to interpret that comment and gave no response, wise enough not to let it bother him. As the day burned away, the expansive gray clouds in the sky condensed, and it was obvious a storm was brewing.

“Are we almost there?” Raymond asked.

“Right up here,” Phineas said, gesturing at the hill they were about to march upon.

The mound was at the center of a field, covered by wheatgrass and shrubs. At the top was a clear, flat area, a square lawn with a perimeter of cut and erected stone pillars, presumably the work of men. That “mist in the air” Phineas spoke about was felt potently by Raymond; this was certainly one of those “sanctuaries.”

“Well, this is it,” Phineas said, arriving at his destination in the center of the box, the other three gathering 'round.

“This is it?” Hammond repeated. Phineas nodded.

The sun was near setting, and rain began to spittle, the weather glooming.

“So what's the idea, huh? You lead us out to the middle of nowhere for what, so that we can kick your ass? You've been stringing us along long

enough, you little fucking creep," Norman lambasted.

Phineas bit his tongue; he had a crooked smirk on his face, but looked anxious. The gaining wind rustled the landscape, bellowing the foliage. A shine caught Raymond's attention; it was those eyes again, more of them appearing, glinting yellow past the tall grass.

Phineas faced away and shouted into the distance, singing to the wood: "fishies, fishies, fishies for me, fishies fill my belly with glee, fishies, fishies, catch 'em quick, catch 'em with my fishy stick!"

Streams of darkness poured from the far treetops, drifting overhead like a fog, swirling together into a pool of black mass above the group. The storm ripened, the light dimming as water fell harder. Raymond, Hammond, and Norman were left speechless and diminute.

Phineas danced and spasmed in the rain, laughing, until an entity became cohesive and presented itself in the blackness. At first, he was confused by the being's intention, then terror seized him. The judgment was proclaimed that he was no longer needed. He had greedily enjoyed the fruits of this realm for too long, becoming comfortable and sterile. A dome cascaded from the fog, strutting itself on the pillars. A force radiated which beat

down and paralyzed Phineas, sending him to his hands and knees.

"I did everything you said! I did everything you told me!" Phineas pleaded, whipping his head around erratically. He was dragged up and sucked into the black, screaming until he disappeared, his existence ending abruptly.

The sack which he carried crashed to the ground and burst open, the bottle broken, the cards scattered, but the flashlight intact.

Norman unsheathed his machete, yelling belligerently. Raymond stood vigilant, while Hammond was idle, infatuated with the unfolding event. The wind and rain lashed severely, and soon the friends would be dealt with accordingly, until an intense burst of illumination lit up the field. It seared through and disrupted the entity, reeling it back, then a deafening thunder roared. This was his chance, Raymond thought, and noticing the flashlight on the ground, he knew he needed that powerful tool. He dove down, snatched it, scrambled up, and then darted off and down the hill. Hammond and Norman ran as well, escaping in opposite directions.

The slope below was slippery, propelling him forward shakily back into the woods. Yellow eyes and dark limbs wisped, racing to capture Raymond, but were repressed by the activating flashlight. He hastily scanned around, clearing his

course with light, forcing the creatures to be cast back with creaks and hisses. Night was well into falling as Raymond came to find the creek again, a peninsula of boulders and smaller stones between it, the stream of water amplified by runoff.

Hammond was standing on the tallest rock, ominously, and called out: “They want you to shut off the light, there's no use fighting it!”

“No, we can still get back home!” Raymond responded, approaching and stepping up the boulders. “Phineas said that we would never make it out, and he was right. Please, this is our home now, don't you get that? Don't make them any more mad than they already are.”

“You're acting crazy, c'mon, we don't have time for this.” Raymond reached the top and grabbed him by the arm, but was surprised when Hammond aggressively shoved him, almost knocking him over the ledge. Hammond grappled with Raymond, yelling into his face, and they wrestled as giggling echoed from the dark. Raymond broke free and smacked Hammond in the head with the flashlight, sending him tumbling into the creek, which washed him away.

Raymond saw that the water was quickly rising as the rain became more violent, so he swiftly but cautiously hopped down and continued jogging. He tried to focus on survival, despite the chaos and confusion. While these thoughts racked his mind, he

tripped and slid onto the ground, covering the front of himself in mud. He extended his hand to grab the dropped flashlight and was met with a pair of those beady yellow eyes. Its pupils were wide yet slit, its face shrouded in what looked like fur. The form was too bathed in shadow for many features to be discerned, nebulously woven with the environment. Raymond grabbed the tool and scampered to his feet, running onward. He felt the unyielding pursuit of the creatures like a breath on his neck, pushing the race forward along the creek. The sound of crashing water was heard ahead, and when he was near enough, he discovered it was a waterfall. He thought, could this have been the spot that Hammond spoke of? A steep path wound up and past the fall's ridge, so he started it. Clambering on slabs, grabbing roots and branches, trying desperately to ascend without slipping. He arrived at the peak, hoisting himself over and onto a floor of rock. He knelt briefly, exhausted. Hearing the steps of boots amidst the rolling rapids, he cocked his head to see a figure approaching with a long blade held by his side.

“Norman?” Raymond said, but the figure didn't respond, walking faster and with menace.

As he stood up, the man swung the blade at his head. Luckily, Raymond positioned the flashlight to block it, which it did, immediately breaking and crumbling. In closer proximity, he

confirmed it was indeed Norman who was attacking him. Raymond had no better choice than to grapple with the hand that gripped the machete, attempting to remove it or use it against his opponent.

“You're with them! You're with them!” Norman shouted as they struggled.

The blade's edge nicked Raymond's thigh, slicing his skin and making him yelp in pain. He pressed against Norman, using his body to shove them backward, allowing an opportune length of distance. Norman raised his machete and charged at his victim in an act of blind rage. Raymond paid careful attention to the shadowy visage that barreled towards him, waiting for the perfect moment to evade the threat. He dove low beyond Norman as he chopped his weapon down, the speed that he cultivated becoming unmanageable without the absorption of a crash target. Norman flung off the cliff, a bassy scream descending to a visceral crunch of bone. Raymond peered down, unable to see much but a swarm of yellow eyes gathering on what looked like the body. The darkness of night was now in full swing, and the task of traversing the forest seemed impossible, especially without a light source. But Raymond wouldn't allow himself to accept it; he dropped the handle of his crumpled tool and walked on into the brush, the wound on his leg stinging. His mind was bombarded with a mess of voices, his own and those of his friends, while

the monsters cackled and whispered to each other. The only solution he concluded was to try not to think. He accelerated the pace at which he traveled, not minding being ripped at by a thicket or shoulder-checked by a tree. Raymond sparked a flame in his imagination and followed it. Although his personage was completely subject to this external circumstance, he could at least keep the entity at bay from his spirit. He stumbled into a hill, crawling and trudging up it. Something was pulling at his back, trying to stop him. The voices crescendoed into growls and yells, but he persevered. A beam of light shone over the slopes' bend, giving Raymond a charging burst of hope. He shuffled up and reached a short metal barrier that felt like a long fence, which he easily climbed over. His feet hit asphalt, and he dashed forward. The last thing he saw was the incoming shine of two beautiful high beams before he lost consciousness.